

# The Golden Rule and Civil Rights

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## Age Range:

Grades 7-12

## Lesson Objectives:

As the result of completing this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify the reciprocity principle expressed by the Golden Rule.
2. Identify the Golden Rule as a foundational principle for equal treatment under the law.
3. Identify ways that this principle can be applied to improve relationships in family, school, church, and community, allowing to effectively serve others and thereby serve God.

## Background:

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy called on Congress to enact comprehensive legislation to protect the civil rights of African-Americans, including the right to enter institutions of higher education. In his famous speech, often referred to as “The Civil Rights Speech,” he appealed to a principle of ethics which has become known as the Golden Rule: the idea that we should treat others in the way we would like to be treated. The Golden Rule is an expression of the rule of reciprocity and is a basis for treating well even those with whom we have strong disagreement.

## Materials Needed:

Mp3 file of Civil Rights Address by John F. Kennedy

(<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkcivilrights.htm>)

## Preparation:

Listen to and download the mp3 of President Kennedy’s speech for replay in class

Have a transcript of the speech available as a hand out (Direct link to the PDF is found on the same [web page](#) as the audio download. The script is four pages long.)

If you plan to use the Bob Dylan song, you can often find this song on You Tube or purchase from iTunes.

## Group Time (8 minutes)

Introduce the concept of the Golden Rule by asking the class for volunteers to define it. Take a few and use those as a spring board to define it as the principle of treating other people in the way that you want to be treated. Leaders could also have students write down their definitions on a piece of paper, turn them in without names, and then the leader can read a few chosen at random.

Note the reciprocity principle. Social life seems impossible without it. Giving something to someone else seems to create in the receiver a feeling of obligation to reciprocate in kind. Thus, behaving positively toward others should create a sense of duty to respond in kind. Most religions elevate this norm to an expectation of a follower of the faith. For instance, Jesus teaches his disciples to live in this manner.

Then introduce two verses from the New Testament.

Luke 6:31 - Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Matthew 7:12 - So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Note that these verses are at the heart of Jesus' teaching on how to relate to others in general – those with whom we agree and those with whom we don't. Also, note that this teaching is significant. Jesus said the Law and Prophets could be summarized in this attitude – it must be important and relevant for us today.

## Activity Time (20 minutes)

Tell the class that you are going to play a speech by the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, John F. Kennedy. Briefly set the stage by explaining the events of the time. Alabama Governor George Wallace had blocked two African-American students - Vivian Malone and James A. Hood – from entering the University of Alabama because of their race. On June 11, 1963, President Kennedy federalized Alabama National Guard troops to force the school to admit them to class. Then later that same day, President Kennedy spoke to the nation about the incident and asked the nation to end racial discrimination.

Then tell the class that you are going to play the 13 minute speech that Kennedy gave that day and ask them if they can hear the principle of the Golden Rule in Kennedy's speech. An option to consider is to ask them to lift their hand or signal you in some way when they hear a reference to the Golden Rule. Play it all the way through without stopping.

President Kennedy appealed to the Golden Rule several times throughout the speech. Here are those references:

In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated.

This is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety. Nor is this a partisan issue. In a time of domestic crisis men of good will and generosity should be able to unite regardless of party or politics. This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. It is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets, and new laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right. We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who will represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

Therefore, I'm asking for your help in making it easier for us to move ahead and to provide the kind of equality of treatment which we would want for ourselves; to give a chance for every child to be educated to the limit of his talents.

At the end of the recording, give each student a transcript of the speech, break the class into three groups and ask them to work together to circle passages in the speech where President Kennedy referred to the Golden Rule. This should only take 3-4 minutes. Each group can be asked to read a different section until the specific references noted above are covered.

### **Group Application Time (10-15 minutes)**

Now ask the small groups to suggest a scenario from daily life where applying the Golden Rule could help improve relationships between individuals or groups. They should take about 5 minutes to come up with one and then 7-10 minutes for the groups to share what they decided. This may be difficult for some groups so, alternative, you may want to suggest some situations and ask the students how the Golden Rule applies. One possible scenario is the [Freshman in the Lunchroom skit](#) available on the Golden Rule Pledge website.

### **Wrap Up and Commitment (10 minutes)**

The main points to drive home and discuss (time permitting) are:

We can apply the Golden Rule is a universal way to protect our own interests as well as the interests of others (reciprocity principle).

When you think about how you want to be treated, it can help you know how your actions affect others. If you don't want to be hurt, don't hurt others. If you enjoy freedoms, then you should not deprive others of freedoms. If you want to be treated with respect, then respect others. If you don't want to be called hurtful names, then don't call others hurtful names.

We serve God by keeping His teachings in relationship to other people who also exist in the Image of God.

### **Closing Prayer and/or Meditation**

If it would fit the mood and tastes of your group, you could play Bob Dylan's song about the Golden Rule as a closing. You could also play the DC Talk song [Colored People](#) by DC Talk.